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AUTHOR Roth, Jeffrey; Myers-Jennings, Corine
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ABSTRACT

A case study evaluated the effectiveness of the Even Start family literacy project, which integrates within a single continuum of service three formerly separate curricular components: adult education, early childhood education, and parent education. A series of case study interviews were conducted over a 4-year period with 11 adult participants in the Even Start program administered by the School Board of Alachua County in Gainesville, Florida. At the study site, Even Start was a constituent program of the Family Services Center (FSC), a facility jointly operated by the school district and the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, Florida's chief social welfare agency. Results indicated: (1) participants contrasted favorably their help-seeking experiences at the FSC with previous experiences at headquarters of agencies that now outposted workers to the FSC; and (2) for many participants, making the effort to comply with classes and workshops distracted them from a previous existence which was isolated and directionless, and gave them the occasion to draw comfort and guidance from others who were further along in their journey toward self-sufficiency. Results also indicated five stages in participants' growth in self-respect which culminated in an enlarged sense of personal efficacy: regenerated self-esteem, self-confidence, speaking up, involvement, and governance. Findings suggest that family-centered early intervention programs like Even Start represent an important mechanism for attaining the first and fourth of the Goals 2000--all children ready for school, and every adult literate and able to compete in the work force respectively. (Contains 13 references.) (RS)

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How Integration Of Services Facilitates Family Literacy:

Testimony From Even Start Participants

Jeffrey Roth, University of Florida

Corine Myers-Jennings, South Carolina State University

Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association

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How Integration Of Services Facilitates Family Literacy: Testimony From Even Start Participants

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share with researchers and evaluators working in the area of family-centered early intervention the perspectives of participants in an Even Start family literacy project. Even Start was conceived as a program that would integrate within a single continuum of service three formerly separate curricular components: adult education, early childhood education, and parent education (St. Pierre, Swartz, Murray, Deck, Nickel, 1993). The underlying rationale for the program was to break the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy by simultaneously educating parent and child while arranging access to a network of support through collaboration with other human services agencies such as health, employment, and economic assistance. How program participants at one Even Start site evaluated this effort to integrate services and what effects it had on their lives will be described in the body of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The organizational paradigm shift toward collaboration in family-centered early intervention programs has been clearly set forth in the work of Sharon Kagan (1989, 1994). In addition to the marked emphasis on teamwork which modern organizations have had to adopt in order to respond to rapidly changing, highly complex problems arising out of a deeply interconnected political/economic/social global environment, Kagan also attributes the spread of collaboration to the widening acceptance of ecology

as a social/psychological construct (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The practical consequences of adopting an ecological orientation has been the entwining of formerly discrete entities--parent and child (Powell, 1988); home and school (Christenson & Conoley, 1992); education and families (Kaplan, 1992). For human services professionals, this holistic approach has meant targeting early intervention services simultaneously to adults and children and then tracking the family unit as it moves together and individually through a continuum of identified and addressed needs.

Methods and Data Sources

A series of case studies interviews (Seidman, 1991) were conducted over a four year period with eleven adult participants in the Even Start family literacy project administered by the School Board of Alachua County in Gainesville, Florida. Participants were interviewed at six month intervals for 45 minutes to two hours, using an open ended, 15-item questionnaire. Sample questions from the initial, intermediate, and exit interview protocols included: "What does it feel like to be going to school again?"; "How has your child changed since we last talked?"; "Describe any ways you think being in Even Start has affected your everyday life?" "What suggestions would you have that might make Even Start more helpful to new families just beginning?" Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using Strauss' (1990) constant comparative method to isolate commonalities and divergences.

Results

At this study site, Even Start was a constituent program of the Family Services Center (FSC), a facility jointly operated by the local school district and the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), Florida's chief social welfare agency. As a result of joint budgeting and planning, including Full Service Schools and Supplemental School Health grants, FSC was able to collocate at one site (seven interconnected portable buildings adjacent to an elementary and a middle school in the poorest quadrant of the city) the following programs: Economic Services (AFDC and Food Stamps); ABE (Adult Basic Education) and GED classes; First Start (a state early intervention program for infants and toddlers); mental health services; parenting education; employability training; and a primary health care screening clinic.

The benefits that Even Start families attributed to this policy of integrating services and programs into a one-stop-shop were analyzed along two dimensions: (1) horizontally, as synergy across programs, and (2) vertically, as synergy within Even Start.

1. Synergy across programs

Participants contrasted favorably their help-seeking experiences at the FSC with previous experiences at headquarters of agencies who now outposted workers to the FSC. The key was the smaller scale of the operation:

It was very difficult and the health department was like, by the time, if your baby isn't sick when you get there they could be from all the other kids, which is

anywhere, but I means there is just so much more. And it might take you all day to get to see a doctor. Where you have a shorter length of time, it's really great.

Another result of simplified access and assessment procedures was the opportunity for the combined client/student/patient to develop familiarity with the small cadre of professionals collocated in the portables. Referrals across programs could be done face to face, resulting in quicker placement. With frustration from delays reduced, parents could begin to develop a sense of trust in and loyalty to the FSC site itself and to the professionals who were teaming up to expedite enrollment into needed services. In a relatively short amount of time, usually by the end of three months, participants experienced the FSC as a mediating institution, one that operated on the caring principles of a family:

I just like the closeness. Everybody was so caring. You don't find that in today's society, in any type of program or anything. It's like you're just there, get done what you have to do. But the people here just care. They make you feel, you know. it's like I've known them my whole life. . . . I think the people here are great, very close-knit. It's a good thing because, like, any type of social service, the people don't seem to care the way the people do here.

2. Synergy within Even Start

Even Start requires that participants attend all three core components of the program: Adult education, parent education, and early childhood education. For many participants, making the effort to comply with a schedule of classes and workshops had

two rewards: one was a distancing from a previous existence which was isolated and directionless; second was the occasion to draw comfort and guidance from other women who were further along in their journey toward self-sufficiency. (Ninety eight percent of the 163 families served were headed by single parent females.)

> *I'm just glad I have somewhere. It makes me feel like I have a job I can come to now because I can get fixed up now, fix the kids up, and we don't have clothes that just sit there because we didn't have anywhere to go. Now I can get them dressed and myself, fix all of us up. So that is how it has changed.*
>
> *What I really enjoy about the parenting classes, get with other mothers, and see their—how they are, you know what I'm saying. And I mean as far as how they—just be able to interact with other mothers, and talk to other mothers and say, 'Well, this is what mine did, and this is what this one did.'*

Perhaps the most important form of mutual reinforcement in Even Start was the synergy between adult ed. and early childhood ed. When parents demonstrated dedication to completing their own education, they became a positive role model to their children for doing academic work, and more generally, for persisting in the face of difficulties.

> *I want to go to school, but then, you know you have those days where, 'I ain't going today. I just don't feel like it.' But I got to get up and make myself, get myself a kick in the butt and push. And then, JT, he loves it. He knows he's*

going to school. He say, 'Momma, I go to school.' And that let me know he really want to go, so it's time to go.

All three educational components of Even Start were organized around the principle of self paced, exploratory learning. As parent and child both learned problem-solving skills in a setting which placed equal emphasis on social as well as academic competence, both acquired the readiness to succeed in school and community:

When she goes to the sitter where she has other kids to play with, then they never know what to do and they can never agree. Here, it's more organized, where they colored all at the same time and they didn't get bored with none of it. They get to interact with each other and they still have the guidance of an adult.

I like being around older people. Like when my kid's sick, I'm thinking about rushing to the hospital. 'No, why don't you try a sponge bath. Bathe him.' They teach me things that at 23 I would just think about rushing to the emergency room. I have like this group in my neighborhood. Older people get together and I say; 'I have this problem. I just need some kind of support.' So then we all sit down and we'll talk about things, and it's just off my mind.

An Enlarged Conception of Family Literacy

As the preceding quotations from Even Start participants illustrate, family literacy is to be understood as much more than an ability to decode written texts. Following the lead of Elsa Auerbach (1989) and Vivian Gadsen (1994), who in turn draw inspiration from the work of Paulo Freire (1987), family literacy should be conceived of as a

threshold form of political engagement, encompassing a broad range of sociocultural activities whose end-in-view is the creation and sustenance of proud, independent, assertive social actors committed to improving not only their own lives but also helping those still struggling within their communities.

Taken as a whole, the testimony of these eleven women describes a growth in self-respect which culminated in an enlarged sense of personal efficacy. Five stages in this evolution can be discerned within the responses that interviewees gave over the four-year life of the program: regenerated self-esteem, self-confidence, speaking up, involvement, governance. Each of these stages can be represented by statements made during the final, retrospective interviews conducted at the close of the fourth year.

Regenerated self-esteem. The basis for a new sense of self-worth lay in the consistency of caring displayed by staff who forgave and challenged the sometimes erratic efforts undertaken by these women who were painfully aware of their previous history of antagonism and failure with bureaucracies that claimed to have their best interests at heart.

They never gave up on me; regardless of what, they never gave up. They helped me keep coming, helped motivate me a lot. . . . I can always fall back on them with certain things if I really need to.

She [the family liaison specialist] makes sure that I get all the help I need; she always remembers things that I told her later, always bringing it up, let's me know that she really cares, and makes me feel very comfortable.

Self-confidence. Once these initially wary adults learned that in this caring environment making mistakes was not a punishable offense, they were able to take the chance of trying out some of the strategies recommended by program staff and guest speakers. Perhaps the most potent of these recommendations was to volunteer; volunteering was a way of demonstrating that a person had something worthwhile to offer.

I was going to the parenting class and they were saying: "Volunteer, volunteer." And then my son started asking me to come to the school. so I just started coming, and I really enjoy it. . . . I got a certificate volunteering at my son's school last year, at Prairie View, so that kinda like made him [a boyfriend] feel good. And I told him, you know he's a very shy person, and this woman was talking about volunteering, I told him, "It doesn't matter how you think other people feel or may look down on you, you're volunteering, you stay focused. Don't let other people intimidate you not to do what you want to do."

Speaking up. The experiences that accompanied volunteering ('dealing with outside people') and the ensuing recognition initiated in several previously intimidated individuals a renewed commitment to attain for themselves and their children equitable treatment that would improve their family's life chances.

I've learned there is a right way and a wrong way. If you have a situation that needs—you need help with, speak up. If you have a problem with someone, regardless of what their job is, what their color is, their race, anything about that person, speak up, in an okay manner, not so much fussing and shouting, and if you have to go to that

person, and keep doing it, until you get whatever problem you have solved. So that's one of the main things I have learned, is to speak up, and don't be afraid. No one is no—any more different than I am.

Most always they put us in touch with the right people when we need certain things. I guess I'm still learning because sometimes I didn't know that if you asked you can be put in with the right people.

Involvement. In addition to providing opportunities to learn and to express an opinion about the ways different organizations operate, volunteering had several other virtues. It enabled parents to get to know what was going on in their children's schools and it also set a precedent for finding out about sites of possible future employment

Every young black single parent needs to get involved with their kids and their school. It's very important.

I'm going to take the first two weeks and volunteer at the school so I can get hands-on—meet his teacher and then maybe after that, I'll volunteer one day each week.

Since I have volunteer hours and since I enjoy working with kids, I'll work with the School Board and see what they have available for me there.

Definitely I want to get into nursing because when my mom gets to the age where she can't take care of herself, I don't want a nursing home. . . One of my goals is planning, after I receive my GED, while I'm not in school or setting up for school, I hope to be volunteering, hopefully at Shands or at Alachua General [Hospitals].

Governance. From volunteering at other sites to taking on responsibilities on-site was a natural progression and one that the Family Services Center promoted. It created a parents organization which served two purposes: 1) as an advisory group willing to tackle behavioral problems that might at first best be mediated by peers (e.g., friction between mothers whose children had the same father; classroom disruptions by participants under the influence of drugs or alcohol); and 2) as a auxiliary in charge of sharing information (via a newsletter) and conferring recognition (by staging graduation ceremonies).

They be so busy doing this, that, and the other; then, well, "we can't do it all. We gonna give y'all some type of responsibility." And what they do is they get the group up together and they select different ones to be the president and the vice-president, and secretary. And when they have a problem with anything, they go to the president or the vice-president, and they will sit down and talk it over with them and give them little suggestions and we would bring it up to the rest of them when we get, like, in a pack, in a real group. It's not the parenting group. It would be brought up and they would give their different opinions about it and things like that. It's real nice.

They had this big celebration before the graduation, and we'd be like a little skit of them, how the Family Service Center is ran, We did a skit on that, and some of us said poems, and you know, we talked about the school and different ones for health, and you know, just talked about how good they, you know, help support this, that, and

the other. And then we looked up different groups to come out and sing, and stuff like that.

Conclusion

Family-centered early intervention programs like Even Start represent an important mechanism for attaining the first and fourth of the nation's eight education goals for the year 2000 ("All children ready for school"; "every adult literate and able to compete in the work force"). The press to achieve these goals has profound implications for how colleges of education prepare their graduates:

1. Teachers electing to enter the rapidly growing area of Full Service Schools (Dryfoos, 1994) will need instruction and practicum experience in collaborating with other human service professionals--social workers, case managers, nurses, and psychologists.
2. Knowledge of and empathy for the complex life situations that mark many of the single parent, poverty families eligible for preschool early intervention programs will need to be developed because family-centered programs achieve their results primarily through relations of trust, caring, and intimacy which gradually become established between participants and teachers.
3. Much more vigorous recruitment and retention of minorities into teaching must be undertaken so that the value of post-secondary education is modeled for participants in programs emphasizing literacy and self-sufficiency. Special attention should be directed toward encouraging

graduates of family literacy programs to continue their education beyond the attainment of the General Education Diploma, support for which could be arranged by hiring them as tutors/mentors/aides at the site whose program they successfully completed.

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